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Naming the Rose: Readers and Codes in Umberto Eco's Novel

Steven Sallis

Umberto Eco's theory of semiotics has taken an evolutionary path of development. *A Theory of Semiotics,* the first English edition of Eco's semiotics theory, was a detailed explanation of his theory of signs.[1] The major criticism of this work, a lack of references to specific literary texts to elucidate the theory, led to *The Role of the Reader.*[2] This book repeated the theoretical basis of the first book, but it also included a major section of specific literary texts such as Sue's *Les mystères de Paris* and Allais's *Un drame bien parisien.* Eco reaches the most recent stage of his theoretical work with *The Name of the Rose,* a novel which was published in Italy in 1980 and translated into English in 1983.[3] In this novel, as one critic suggests, Eco has moved from semiotic theory to "semiotic fiction."[4] As Eco himself says in the closing line of his introduction to *The Role of the Reader*: "[a]fter having to let semiotics speak abundantly about texts, it is correct to let a text speak by itself about its semiotic strategy" (*RR,* 40).

In "The Theory of Signs and the Role of the Reader" Eco explains the evolution of semiotics during the past twenty years.[5] During the sixties, semiotics focused on the theoretical foundation of signs or sign-tradition. During the seventies, "there occurred a violent shift from signs to texts"; the emphasis in semiotic theory shifted from considering what constituted a sign to the formation of the text. The third stage (from the end of the seventies to the present) does not center on the "generation of texts but their reading." Eco believes that current semiotic theory is concerned with "the recognition of the reader's response as a possibility built into the textual strategy" (*TS,* 35).

According to Eco, the reader "plays an active role in textual interpretation because signs are constructed according to an inferential model. . . ." Signs are the beginning of a process that leads a reader to an "infinite series of progressive consequences" (*TS,* 44) and are "open devices" that evoke meaning for the reader. This open quality of signs "postulates an active role on the part of their interpreter" (*TS,* 45). By defining this vital theory of signs as moving the reader to an infinite number of possibilities for interpreting a text, Eco argues that semiotics has moved beyond simply listing elaborate patterns for understanding signs and texts (a frequent criticism of semiotic theories) to the importance of the reader in understanding the signs found in the text.

In *The Role of the Reader* Eco identifies the possible reader as the "Model Reader," who deals *interpretatively* with the codes within a text just as the author deals *generatively* with the codes. The Model Reader and author thus co-

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operate in discovering the codes of a text (*RR,* 7). The author can create for the reader two kinds of texts, closed or open. A closed text is designed by the author to elicit a specific response from the reader. However, Eco maintains, the closed text is actually open to several possible interpretations. The text is considered closed precisely because it does not adequately take the reader's ability to interpret a variety of readings into account (*RR,* 8). The reader of the open text, on the other hand, feels comfortable with "the maze-like structure of the text." A reader can use the open text, however, only as the open text wants to be used. Eco adds the caution that no matter how open a text is it "cannot afford whatever interpretation" a reader might try to force on the text (*RR,* 9).

Thus the Model Reader for an open text must be open to a multitude of codes and their interpretations. The open text can be read in two ways: naively and critically. The textual strategy for a particular text dictates whether a naive reader, a critical one, or both will be required. The naive reader is unable to perceive the maze-like structure of the open text and, therefore, is unable to appreciate the text fully. The critical reader succeeds only by overcoming the naive reading and discovering the textual strategy which will help explain the codes of the text. Both the naive and the critical reader approach a metatext, a text which is both closed and open. Requiring such exactness makes the task of the reader of the metatext, such as *The Name of the Rose,* an exercise in freedom. If the reader is to enjoy a text, all the "paths of [the text's] reading" must be explored (*RR,* 10).

A reader could explore *The Name of the Rose* on several levels. Descriptions of monastic and civic rivalry, the troubled history of the papacy in the fourteenth century, and lists of medieval herbs, beasts, and favorite books would captivate a reader with interests in the Renaissance. The unusual murders, clues to the murderer's identity, and the narrator's observations would lead the adept mystery-reader to the text in order to try to solve the mystery of the novel's intrigue. The exposition of Eco's semiotic theory would lead the reader interested in literary criticism to yet another level of reading, the examination of the role of the reader in interpreting a text.

As far as I have been able to determine, no one has yet attempted to explain Eco's use of the naive and the critical reader within his novel.[6] Eco reveals the two kinds of readers through two characters in the novel who explore the world within the text by discovering the meaning of signs just as a naive or a critical reader outside the text could discover the meaning of the metatext. Adso, the narrator, represents the naive reader. Writing the story as an old Benedictine monk, Adso describes the events that took place years earlier when he was a young novice. Although Adso has a gift for observation, which he uses throughout his story to describe such details as the physical features of the people he meets and the art and architecture of the great abbey, his description is merely a collection of surface details with little or no reflection on their sig-

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nificance or meaning. Being unable to see beyond the immediate situation, Adso is incapable of understanding the real meaning of the clues presented to him.

The critical reader is reflected in William of Baskerville, a fourteenth-century Franciscan version of Sherlock Holmes.[7] William is sent to various abbeys on official church business because of his reputation as a shrewd observer of life. Adso describes William's ability to deduce truth from facts as follows:

> He not only knew how to read the great book of nature, but also knew the way monks read the books of Scripture, and how they thought through them. A gift that, as we shall see, was to prove useful to him in the days to follow. (*NR*, 24–25)

William represents the critical reader who recognizes various levels of signs in the universe (the great book of nature) and in books. Just as a critical reader is able to find a way through the maze-like structure of a text, so William is able to find his way through the maze of clues in order to solve the mystery he has been asked to solve.

According to Eco, both the naive and the critical reader can approach an open text (*RR*, 10). In *The Name of the Rose* Eco allows both types of readers to be represented in both Adso and William. Both characters help to explain the significance of the readers of a text by helping the reader of the novel to find a path through the text's maze. Eco has helped the reader to develop a textual strategy by showing how the text can be "read" by the naive reader and the critical reader.

In *The Role of the Reader* Eco offers a critical reading of the metatext *Un drame bien parisien.* He states that the critical reading not only assumes that the first (naive) reading has already occurred but that the critical reading undergoes "the analysis of its own interpretative procedures" while it goes beyond the naive reading (*RR*, 205). *The Name of the Rose* is also a metatext: it is closed "in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole," and it is open "on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity" (*RR*, 49). As a metatext, *The Name of the Rose* can be seen to have several stories to tell (as Eco suggests for the metatext *Un drame bien parisien*):

> the story of what happens to its *dramatis personae;* the story of what happens to its naive reader; the story of what happens to itself as a text (this third story being potentially the same as the story of what happens to the critical reader). (*RR*, 205)

The Name of the Rose is seen in its simplest form as the story of the characters themselves. William of Baskerville, a Franciscan, is on a visitation at a Benedictine abbey. Upon arriving at the abbey, William is asked by the abbot to investigate the strange death of one of the monks. In the course of William's visit,

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four other monks are murdered. William, with the help of his traveling companion, Adso, eventually discovers the murderer, who commits suicide. The murderer's death leads to a fire, which burns down the great abbey. This very brief summary captures the essence of the first level of the story.

The second and third levels of the story cannot be seen apart from their codes. In brief, codes are the keys which unlock the signs of a text. The code contains elements which are present in the expression of the story and also refers to elements which are absent because they are part of another system.[8] This presence/absence component of codes allows for the richness of intertextuality by which "a text could generate, by further semantic disclosures, every other text" (*RR,* 24). This intertextual element is extremely important in *The Name of the Rose,* as the dust jacket of the first Italian edition of the novel suggests: "this text is a textile of other texts, a 'whodunit' of quotations, a book built upon books" (Stephens, 51).

Eco skillfully interlaces his text with allusions to a wide spectrum of religious texts, philosophy, and literature. In several passages in the novel, he uses *The Rule of St. Benedict* as a text within his text. William and Adso enjoy a meal with the abbot which illustrates Eco's use of the *Rule* by discussing

> that passage in the Rule where the holy founder observed that wine, to be sure, is not proper for monks, but since monks of our time cannot be persuaded not to drink, they should at least not drink their fill, because wine induces even the wise to apostasy, as Ecclesiastes reminds us. Benedict said 'of our time' referring to his own day, now very remote. . . . (*NR,* 94)

A comparison of this passage with Chapter 40, in the *Rule* "The Proper Amount of Drink," reveals that Eco has used the text well by pointing out Benedict's admonition to the abbot to take local needs into consideration in such matters as food and drink.[9] Texts from the Bible also find frequent use in Eco's novel. The murders are patterned after the Apocalypse, and Adso frequently makes scriptural references a part of his descriptions. References are also made to Aristotle, William of Occam, Thomas Aquinas, and Roger Bacon, who represent some of the authors of philosophical texts which find their way into the novel.

Walter Stephens suggests that the character of Jorge of Burgos is patterned after Jorge Luis Borges. Stephens says that *The Name of the Rose* "owes its heaviest literary debt to the fiction and essays of Borges, and explicates much of Eco's semiotics as Borgesian." Indeed, according to Stephens, Borges's idea of the library as "a semantic cosmos, a specular inversion of the medieval idea of *liber mundi,* of the cosmos as a book" is reflected in the abbey library in Eco's novel. The many similarities between Burgos and Borges, (e.g., both are interested in literature) point to the skillful use of intertextuality by Eco in his novel (Stephens, 58).[10]

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The importance of intertextuality emerges especially in the final chapter when Adso describes events after the fire has consumed the abbey. He returns to his monastery at Melk to become a monk. Years later Adso's abbot sends Adso to Italy, and he cannot resist a visit to the abbey's ruins. He collects scraps of books which he finds scattered about the ruins and upon his return to Melk describes the restoration process of the remnants as follows:

> I spent many, many hours trying to decipher those remains. Often from a word or a surviving image I could recognize what the work had been. When I found, in time, other copies of these books, I studied them with love, as if destiny had left me this bequest, as if having identified the destroyed copy were a clear sign from heaven that said to me: Tolle et lege. At the end of my patient reconstruction, I had before me a kind of lesser library, a symbol of the greater, vanished one: a library made up of fragments, quotations, unfinished sentences, amputated stumps of books. (*NR,* 500).

Adso has preserved some of the texts for posterity in his own way by compiling a collection of the fragments; he has created his own intertext which will be saved for future generations.

That the novel is a book built upon books is particularly important when one considers that the main occupation of the monks is related to books. The abbey has one of the greatest libraries in Europe and prides itself on the library's reputation. Some of the abbey's books, in fact, are found nowhere else in the world. Yet in addition to serving as a repository for the world's great books, the abbey library carries on the literary tradition by helping the monks copy the older manuscripts to preserve their contents. (Actually, the monks do not simply copy the manuscripts but engage in adorning the text with marginalia, notes, figures, and other artistic embellishments.) The monks who work in the scriptorium begin to identify themselves with the manuscripts they are copying and consider themselves guardians of the great learning of the world.

What is most remarkable about the abbey library is not its extensive collection, however, nor the amount of time the monks spend in preserving its contents but its physical arrangement. The abbey library is a labyrinth to which only the abbey librarian and his assistant know the solution. The knowledge found in the library must be mediated through someone who is able to understand the mystery of its secret (code). Even when William is given permission by the abbot to conduct an investigation about the murders, he is not allowed to see the library. He must be content, like other patrons, to find the listing for a book in the great catalog and ask the librarian to bring the requested book. The monks have become so possessive of their books that they have forgotten the very purpose for which they are kept: to allow others to share in the knowledge contained therein. The library has become a stagnant entity rather than a vital force for the members of the abbey or for any other potential patrons.

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As William continues his investigation, he is certain that the solution to the murders lies within the labyrinth/library. All of the murdered monks had direct contact with the library, and all the clues that William is able to deduce are related to the library. He is determined that the solution to the library must be found in order to continue his investigation. One night William takes Adso with him to investigate the library. The results are disastrous. They lose their way several times and almost give up hope of finding their way out before they accidentally discover an exit.

The story at this point remains on the second level of the naive reading. Here again, through the events in the story Eco suggests something about naive and critical readings. Entering the library for the single purpose of solving the murders, William does not take into account the other possible codes or secrets which the library might have to offer. As a result of this narrow possibility for interpretation, William remains with Adso on the naive level of interpretation. As a reader William excludes certain available interpretations, and thus the library and its codes are a source of confusion—the maze is unintelligible. As a naive reader William creates a closed interpretation. It is only when William gives up trying to force his own preconceived interpretation on the library that he and Adso are able to find their way out of it. Similarly, only when a reader truly responds to a text as the text wishes to be responded to will a reader find its true meanings.

The heading of the chapter in which William finally discovers the secret of the library's maze states that "William has some astounding ideas for deciphering the riddle of the labyrinth and succeeds in the most rational way" (*NR,* 210). The story begins to move toward the third level of critical reading. William knows certain things about the labyrinth from the experience of being inside the library when he and Adso were lost. Yet it is impossible to try to solve the maze from inside the library because the possibilities are too limited; as one moves within it, one is constantly changing directions and therefore cannot visualize the whole maze. William tells Adso, "we must find, from the outside, a way of describing the Aedificium as it is inside . . ." (*NR,* 215). Using logic and mathematics, William is able to figure out the general plan of the maze from looking at the outside of the Aedificium, the number of windows, the placement of windows in certain walls, and other details. By looking at the outside structure (the known), William is able to understand the inside (the not-immediately-apparent meaning) of the library. Similarly, the reader of the novel receives more information on the codes within the text by William's discovery.

After Adso's preliminary drawing of the library based on their observations outside the Aedificium, William and Adso once again venture into the library and succeed this time in discovering the secret (code) of the library. Two patterns of organization for the labyrinth/library emerge: one according to the first letter of a passage from the Apocalypse which appears on the wall of each

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room and the second according to a map of the world. The answer has required William's knowledge of the books of Scripture as well as the book of nature.

If interpreting the code of the library were enough to solve the mystery behind the murders, Eco would have created a closed text instead of an open one. But William still must discover what the library holds that would merit murder. He returns to books for his answer because, as he tells Adso, "Often books speak of other books" (*NR,* 286). William pores over the catalog of books, analyzes handwriting, and tries to uncover the code for a secret message written by Venantius, one of the murdered monks. He is able finally to decode the secret message but ends up with another riddle: there is a particular book in the library which holds the secrets of the mystery. Eco constantly reminds the reader that codes are very complex in a metatext and require many levels of interpretation; naming the rose is not an easy task to accomplish.

William, with the help of the ravings of the semi-mad monk Alinardo, believes that the murders follow the pattern of the images in the book of the Apocalypse. For example, the second trumpet heralds blood; Venantius is found drowned in a vat of pig's blood. William discovers the murderer's identity, however, because he remains open to the clues; he no longer tries to force the clues to suit his own needs as he did earlier in the library when he and Adso were lost. Moving from the Apocalypse to the details surrounding the acquisition of certain manuscripts of the Apocalypse which also contain the secret book, William identifies the murderer, the old blind librarian, Jorge of Burgos, and the secret book, the second part of Aristotle's *Poetics,* which discusses laughter.

This passage points out the necessity of both a naive and a critical reader for a metatext. Although William at this point of the story has become a critical reader, Adso remains a naive reader. William has looked so intently at the clues that he is unable to see the obvious clue pointing to Jorge's identity as the murderer. While William and Adso are in the stables discussing the clues, Adso suggests to William the identity of the murderer. It takes Adso's less reflective, indeed impulsive, suggestion to lead William to the murderer's identity.

Because of Adso's suggestion, William is now able to find the finis Africae, a secret room within the library which he has been trying to find. He is able to locate the secret passageway and finds Jorge, who explains his reasons for protecting Aristotle's *Poetics.* Jorge believes that if the world discovers Aristotle's book which is devoted to laughter, then the world will be damned. Jorge has constantly been admonishing the monks not to laugh and to choose their words wisely; he frequently has been quoting the *Rule* which contains an admonition to the monks that they should never laugh (see the *Rule,* chapter 7). Jorge further believes that Jesus never laughed and that it is strictly forbidden by the Christian tradition to engage in the frivolity of laughter. Falling into the monastic temptation of "seduction of knowledge" (*NR,* 185), the blind Jorge is

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unable to see beyond his own narrow vision. Fallen so deeply into the snares of the devil that he is seen as the anti-Christ of the Apocalypse, Jorge is blind to any other possible interpretation for the *Poetics*. William tells Jorge how he discovered his identity:

> Naturally, as the idea of this book and its venomous power gradually began to take shape, the idea of an apocalyptic pattern began to collapse, though I couldn't understand how both the book and the sequence of the trumpets pointed to you. But I understood the story of the book better because, directed by the apocalyptic pattern, I was forced more and more to think of you, and your debates about laughter. So that this evening, when I no longer believed in the apocalyptic pattern, I insisted on watching the stables, and in the stables, by pure chance, Adso gave me the key to entering the finis Africae. (*NR*, 470–71)

Jorge tells William that he made the later murders appear to be modeled after apocalyptic images because that is what William expected to happen. Jorge, however, feels no remorse for the deaths. He is sure that God is directing his activities as he tells William, "I became convinced that a divine plan was directing these deaths, for which I was not responsible" (*NR*, 470). Jorge has merely orchestrated the deaths of the monks rather than directly murdering them.

Having been fooled once, William refuses to be taken in a second time by Jorge's plot and realizes that he must take the book away from Jorge. Jorge, however, decides that in order to save the world he must destroy the *Poetics*. He chooses to eat the pages of the book, which he had covered with poison to safeguard his secret from possible readers. This eating of the poisoned book recalls the action of John in the Book of the Apocalypse and by

> repeating the bibliophagy of St. John and the 'consummation' of the *Liber mundi* in the Book of Revelations (the Apocalypse), which finally makes Eco's fabula an effective repetition of the Apocalypse, . . . Jorge's suicide indirectly sparks the *ecpyrosis* which incinerates the Library and the entire monastery. It is only through Jorge's mimetic suicide that the Apocalypse and the liturgy finally structure Eco's novel in a meaningful sense. (Stephens, 58)

As the monastery burns, there is great confusion. No one is able to organize the monks and servants into an effective force to put out the fire. Everything is lost; all the monks abandon the abbey. Formerly the greatest center of learning in Europe, the monastery is now reduced to ruins.

As Adso finishes his account (and the novel ends), he reflects, "I no longer know what [the manuscript of his story] is about: *stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*" (*NR*, 502). (A translation would be: the rose stands with its former name, we hold on to the bare names.[11]) Adso realizes that he must remain open to the text; as a reader he can no longer allow for a "closed semiotic project like that which Jorge vainly attempted . . ." (Stephens, 63). At the end of his story Adso thus takes on the role of the critical reader. Like William, Adso

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also must overcome the naive reading of the events at the abbey. He must search for the deeper meanings of the texts which he saved from the abbey ruins; he can only accomplish his task as a critical reader.

Thus as the reader comes to the end of Eco's novel, the question of whether Eco succeeds in his piece of "semiotic fiction" can be asked. If Eco had wanted explicitly to demonstrate a thesis, he could have written more theory. Instead, he wrote a novel, which can only be narrated.[12] Furthermore, Eco refuses to admit ownership of the novel by identifying a "manuscript" that he fabricates as the source for the novel (*NR,* 15). Eco's semiotic journey moves beyond theory to narrative. As Teresa de Lauretis claims, Eco advances the idea of sign to a universal significance beyond a mere theoretical foundation.[13] This universal aspect of sign opens up the world of a text available to a reader.

Eco thus places one focus in *The Name of the Rose* on the reader. Both the naive and the critical reader find reflections in the novel in Adso and William, respectively. The movement of these two characters toward encountering the maze-like quality of the library helps the reader interested in literary criticism to see the novel as exploring the role of the reader. Like Adso, the naive reader (the beginning student of literary criticism?) comes to the novel without much critical background but goes away with a new appreciation that allows for further exploration of literary texts. Like William, the critical reader (the seasoned literary critic?) brings his extensive background to the novel and goes away with the realization that even critical readers make mistakes but should be able to enjoy a literary text nonetheless. For the reader of his novel, Eco has made the task of understanding an easy one if the reader is willing to name the rose as "semiotic fiction" which explores the value of signs in literature.

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Notes

1. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976).

2. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979). This work will be referred to parenthetically in the text as *RR.*

3. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose,* trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). This work will be referred to parenthetically in the text as *NR.*

4. Walter E. Stephens, "Ec[h]o in Fabula," rev. of *Il nome della rosa, Diacritics,* 13, No. 2 (1983), 55. This work will be referred to parenthetically in the text as Stephens.

5. Umberto Eco, "The Theory of Signs and the Role of the Reader," *Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association,* 14, No. 1 (1981), 35–45. This work will be referred to parenthetically in the text as *TS.*

6. A source unavailable to me which might contain the discussion of the naive and critical readers in *The Name of the Rose* is an Italian publication, Teresa de Lauretis, *Umberto Eco, Il Castoro,* No. 179 (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1981) as quoted in Stephens, 51.

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7. Stephens, page 55 also describes William as Sherlock Holmes.

8. For a detailed explanation of Eco's definition of code, see Umberto Eco, "The Code: Metaphor or Interdisciplinary Category," *Yale Italian Studies,* 1 (1977), 24–52.

9. *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict In Latin and English with Notes,* ed., Timothy Fry (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 240–41.

10. Stephens's entire essay is a fascinating exploration of Eco's skill in using intertextuality and especially of his use of Borges, but the discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper.

11. The quotation is reflected in "that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet?" (*Romeo and Juliet,* II, ii, 43–44).

12. On dust jacket of first Italian edition of *The Name of the Rose* as quoted in Stephens, 51.

13. Teresa de Lauretis, "Response [to Eco]," *Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association,* 14, No. 1 (1981), 46.

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